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# Liberal Anti-Fascism in the 1930s: The Case of Sir Ernest Barker\*

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One of the few achievements the communist left in Britain can still plausibly claim is its anti-fascism in the 1930s and beyond. This has recently been most dogmatically reasserted in a series of publications by David Renton, who calls for a distinction to be made between “anti-fascists” and “non-fascists.” The former are characterized by their “correct” understanding of fascism and reliance on organized, active resistance, often in the streets; whereas the latter contributed very little to fascism’s defeat.<sup>1</sup> Such a loaded definition of anti-fascism ensures that only the Communist Party and their acolytes fit the bill. But within the historiography even more “neutral”—and seemingly encompassing—definitions have tended, in practice, to look largely to left-wing organizations.

This article will question these perspectives and argue for the significance of a “liberal” anti-fascism, which brought together many Liberal, Conservative and Labour politicians and intellectuals in cross-party pressure groups. What characterized the anti-fascism of these men and women was not resistance to the *actions* of the BUF, which most regarded as thuggish but insignificant, but resistance to the *ideological* challenge to English parliamentary democracy represented by continental “totalitarian” movements. The article will begin by considering the compromised nature of the British Communist Party’s anti-fascist record and why “liberal” historians have, on the whole, tended to underestimate the extent of liberal anti-fascism. It will then suggest that a truly less exclusionary and partisan approach to anti-fascism should readily include the likes of the liberal Sir Ernest Barker and many in his political and social circle. It will also argue that, even accepting Renton’s own, restrictive definition, Barker would still qualify as an anti-fascist, rather than a non-fascist, for he combined a coherent analysis of single-party, totalitarian states with a commitment to organized action through bodies such as the New Estates Community Committee and the Association for Education in Citizenship to remove the pre-conditions of anti-democratic beliefs.

\*I wish to thank Professor Philip Williamson for his interest in and help with this article.

<sup>1</sup>David Renton, “The Attempted Revival of British Fascism,” quoted in Nigel Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 4; David Renton, *This Rough Game: Fascism and Anti-Fascism* (Stroud, 2001), pp. xiii–xiv, 149–51; James Eaden and David Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain since 1920* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 49–50.

I

Compared to the continuing, vigorous disagreements about the nature of generic fascism and the value and content of the "fascist minimum,"<sup>2</sup> the formal definition of anti-fascism in the case of inter-war Britain has tended, by default, to be left in the hands of those with a left-wing bias. The Trotskyite Renton, in particular, insists on the need to distinguish between "anti-fascists," who were "activists, people who objected to the rise of fascism, who hated the doctrines of fascism and did something to stop their growth" and "non-fascists," who objected to fascist ideas but did not mobilize to stop fascists. In addition, he proposes that active resistance is synonymous with collective resistance, which requires organizations: "Almost every anti-fascist shared the belief that fascism could not be beaten by individuals, but only by an anti-fascist group or campaign." This is consistent with Renton's position that Fascism was not a "set of ideas" but "set out to be a mass movement, with real popular support"; his anxiety to ensure that the correct strategy is adopted in the fight against contemporary fascist organizations; and his determination to commend the crucial role of the Communist Party in defeating British fascism, especially in "The Battle of Cable Street." Although, predictably, Renton is critical of the party's support for the Popular Front in the 1930s, which was a "detour rightwards" and "took the Communists away from their long-held belief in street politics," nonetheless, he argues that the party retained "some form of radical politics" and so, "When it came to opposing Mosley on the streets, the most important organization was the Communist Party of Great Britain."<sup>3</sup>

Renton's definition is tailor-made to include only committed communists in the ranks of anti-fascists. Nigel Copsey took issue with the narrowness of Renton's definition in his comprehensive study of anti-fascism in twentieth-century Britain. In its place, Copsey suggests a seemingly more encompassing definition:

Here, anti-fascism is defined as a thought, an attitude or feeling of hostility towards fascist ideology and its propagators which may or may not be acted upon. In other words, anti-fascism can be both active and passive. It can take numerous forms, its sources therefore vary and so conceivably encompass responses by both the state and the media.

<sup>2</sup>Roger Griffin, "The Primacy of Culture: The Current Growth (or Manufacture) of Consensus within Fascist Studies," *Journal of Contemporary History* 37 (2002); Roger Griffin, "Introduction," in Roger Griffin, ed., *Fascism* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 2-3; Tom Linehan, "Comment on Roger Griffin, 'The Primacy of Culture: The Current Growth (or Manufacture) of Consensus within Fascist Studies,'" *Journal of Contemporary History* 37 (2002): 272-74; P. M. Coupland, "The Blackshirted Utopians," *Journal of Contemporary History* 33 (1998): 255-64.

<sup>3</sup>Renton, "The Attempted Revival of British Fascism," p. 4; Renton, *This Rough Game*, pp. xiii-xiv, 149-51; Eaden and Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain*, pp. 49-50. Renton's approach to fascism faithfully follow that of Palme Dutt, who stated in 1934 that, "The specific character of Fascism cannot be defined in terms of abstract ideology or political first principles," but could only be defined by "laying bare its class-basis, the system of class-relations within which it develops and functions, and the class-role which it performs" (Rajani Palme Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* [New York, 1934], p. 76).

It is hard to see who this definition would exclude, beyond various fascist groups and a fringe of fellow travelers. In practice, however, in Copsey's hands, inter-war anti-fascism remains largely the preserve of the Communist Party, although assisted in the 1930s by the state, some local authorities, the Jewish Board of Deputies and the Labour Party and TUC. For Copsey, unlike for Michael Newman, there is an irony in the Communist Party attacking Labour's anti-fascist policy before 1935, since the two approaches "actually worked in tandem," the former provoking the violence that discredited the BUF and the latter's defense of democratic procedures delegitimizing it.<sup>4</sup> In one of the few published studies of anti-fascism outside the metropolis, Nigel Todd celebrates the Communist Party and the ILP as the key players in the North East, mainly because of their willingness to take on the BUF in street fights in Sunderland and Newcastle in the face of Labour passivity.<sup>5</sup> None of these three historians has a place for the anti-fascism of Conservatives or Liberals in inter-war Britain.

British communists have, of course, consistently claimed the credit for defeating the BUF and pointed indiscriminately to any equivocal evaluations of the Mussolini and Hitler regimes by non-communist politicians and intellectuals at any time before the outbreak of war as evidence of fascist sympathies in the British ruling class. Sustaining this claim, however, has involved exaggerating the communists' role or omitting inconvenient facts. Thus Noreen Branson gave no hint of the Communist Party's equivocation over issuing a call to block Mosley's march in October 1936; and, though it worked through existing women's organizations and contained an "impressive list of non-CP sponsors," it was nevertheless the communist women on the Women's Committee Against War and Fascism who "probably exerted a controlling influence."<sup>6</sup> Other examples, however, are of greater significance. The volte-face of regarding social democracy as fascism's "twin" to adopting the popular front strategy is played down. For Jim Fyrth, the turning point of the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in 1935 was "the result of discussions and changes in practice during the preceding years" and the strategy led to "a renaissance of the left wherever the policy was applied." The Communist Party was able to play "a crucial, and in some spheres a leading part, but acted in unity with people of all parties and beliefs, and of none" in the demonstrations against Mosley, as in campaigns for

<sup>4</sup>Copsey, *Anti-Fascism*, pp. 4, 13–79, 189; Michael Newman, "Democracy versus Dictatorship: Labour's Role in the Struggle against British Fascism, 1933–1936," *History Workshop Journal* Issue 5 (Spring 1978): 67–71.

<sup>5</sup>Nigel Todd, *In Excited Times: The People Against the Blackshirts* (Whitley Bay, 1995), pp. 39–45, 54–58; ch.5.

<sup>6</sup>Noreen Branson, *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties* (St. Albans, 1973), p. 317; Noreen Branson, "Myths from Right and Left," in *Britain, Fascism and The Popular Front*, ed. Jim Fyrth (London, 1985), p. 126; Susan Bruley, "Women Against War and Fascism: Communism, Feminism and the People's Front," in *ibid.*, pp. 135, 137.



the unemployed and Aid Spain. More precisely, the allegation of Orwell and others that the anti-fascist policy won no "serious support from Labour Party people or from the working class" was "false." More broadly, Communist Party campaigns "awakened thousands to the dangers and injustices of the time" and "Marxism became an essential part of British political thought."<sup>7</sup> The charge of inconsistency or opportunism is quickly and unconvincingly rejected. Fyrth dismissed the criticism of the "ultra-left" "Trotskyist sects" by simply pointing out that they declined in membership while support "grew steadily" for the Communist Party. Branson denied a conversion to liberalism, since "the fight for the preservation of democratic rights was seen as a crucial element in the struggle for the overthrow of capitalism," a point that she, like Georgi Dimitroff at the Seventh Congress, believed she clinched with a quotation from Lenin.<sup>8</sup>

The episode that most tarnishes British communism's anti-fascist mantle was the strategy of a "People's Government" securing a "People's Peace" between October 1939 and 1941. In *The Betrayal of the Left*, Victor Gollancz, the founder of the Left Book Club, characterized this as "the 'defeatist' policy of Lenin" by which it was irrelevant to the working class which side won in an "imperialist war." Harold Laski, the Labour-supporting Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics, listed its three crucial—but inconsistent and improbable—elements: "That the defeat of the Churchill government is a more urgent matter for the British workers than the defeat of Hitler and Mussolini"; that a People's Government would either make a peace with Hitler or Mussolini or renew the war with Soviet support; and that the formation of a People's Government in Britain would be the signal for action against Hitler by the German people and against Mussolini by the Italian people. Laski continued:

I do not myself believe that men like Mr. Pollitt think for one moment that the Churchill government is as bad for the British worker as the Hitler government for the German. That would make nonsense of hundreds of speeches made by him before October, 1939, and of hundreds of articles written by Stalin's henchmen before the Russo-German Treaty.

Since Laski could not see the possibility of a People's Government except as the result of military defeat or of such intense popular suffering as to create a widespread desire to end the war on any terms, he concluded that "the necessary prelude to the success of the policy urged on the people of this country by the Communist Party is the defeat of Great Britain by Hitler."<sup>9</sup> Andrew Thorpe has

<sup>7</sup>Jim Fyrth, "Introduction: In The Thirties," in *ibid.*, pp. 11, 19, 22, 24.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 15, 16; Branson, "Myths from Right and Left," p. 125. See also, Monty Johnstone, "Trotsky and the People's Front," in *Britain, Fascism and The Popular Front*, pp. 89–114, for Trotsky's theoretical errors.

<sup>9</sup>"Exchange of Letters between the Dean of Canterbury and the Editor," H. J. Laski, "Preface," and Victor Gollancz, "Revolutionary Defeatism and Its Development in C.P. Policy," in Victor Gollancz, ed., *The Betrayal of the Left: An Examination and Refutation of Communist Policy from October 1939 to January 1941: With Suggestions for an Alternative and an Epilogue on Political Morality* (London, 1941), pp. vi, xi–xvii, 109–27.

demonstrated, on the basis of newly available archives in Moscow, that the view of British communists as "slaves of Moscow" between the wars is untenable. This relative autonomy produced, for example, "a reluctance on the part of Comintern officials to commit themselves" regarding the pace and degree of the Communist Party's anti-fascist united-front co-operation with the ILP.<sup>10</sup> If a similar reluctance existed in the period of the People's Government, the moral cowardice of British communists is compounded. James Eaden and David Renton's apologia, that there was a sizeable anti-war current in British society and that "we can begin to see through 1940 a rowing back from openly anti-war positions and a re-emphasis on the centrality of anti-fascism," is especially threadbare.<sup>11</sup>

It is possible to argue that British communism's record in this period was, albeit more through circumstance than design, less compromised, say by collusion with occupying Nazi forces, than that of other European communist parties and was also turned to least electoral advantage after the war. The post-war French Communist Party, for example, forgot the uncomfortable facts of its behavior in occupied France between the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact in August 1939 and the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 and for a long time basked in the "posthumous glory of its heroic militants" between 1941 and 1944.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, on balance, the claim of consistent anti-fascism for the British Communist Party cannot be sustained, except by an unacceptable casuistry.

What acceptance of communist self-justifying claims ultimately demonstrates is the willingness, in James Gregor's words, to "continue to treat the political universe as though it were divided between the evil Right and the benign Left" and to excuse the horrors of, say, the Great Purges, or actions between 1939 and 1941 as caused by "extraneous circumstances." Gregor's own moral position is uncompromising and echoes that of inter-war liberal anti-fascists like Barker: the real twentieth-century contest was between "representative democracies and their anti-democratic opponents."<sup>13</sup> The feeling of the moral superiority of communism over fascism was also a powerful current in the 1930s. It is strikingly illustrated by Beatrice Webb's reaction after a weekend visit to Passfield Corner by Shaw in 1934:

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Thorpe, "Comintern 'Control' of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-43," *English Historical Review* (June 1998): 652-53.

<sup>11</sup> Eaden and Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain*, pp. 68-81.

<sup>12</sup> Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Political Traditions in Modern France* (Oxford, 1994), p. 294; H. R. Kedward, *Occupied France: Collaboration and Resistance, 1940-1944* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 56-57.

<sup>13</sup> A. J. Gregor, *The Faces of Janus: Marxism and Fascism in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, 2000), pp. ix-x.

Why does GBS uphold not only Mussolini but also Hitler and Mosley as leaders to be followed? Why does he imply that their leadership is as valuable as Lenin's, that they also have a vision of a new and more desirable civilization? Then I asked him why exactly he admired Mussolini, Hitler and Mosley: they had no philosophy, no notion of any kind of social reorganization, except their own undisputed leadership instead of parliamentary self-government - what was the good of it all? <sup>14</sup>

Such a double standard in the face of equivalent evils is untenable.

Liberal historians have treated communist claims with more scepticism. Richard Thurlow has argued that Communist Party leaders were more preoccupied with fighting fascism in Spain and increasing Communist influence in trade union and housing associations than with the BUF. The simplistic triumphalism surrounding the communist version of the "Battle of Cable Street" is replaced with a more complex account. The leaders of the 100,000 anti-fascists who on Sunday 4 October 1936 stopped a march by 1,900 Blackshirts were Jewish communist activists who had lost patience with the passivity of Communist Party leadership in the face of the increasing number of fascist attacks on Jews and communists throughout 1936. Although the fascists did not pass that day, it was "the huge anti-fascist demonstration that created the major problem of public order." The Bethnal Green police used truncheons and horses against militant anti-fascists; and of eighty-five arrested by the Hackney police, seventy-nine were anti-fascists. Moreover, according to the police, the effect of Cable Street had been to throw "out of perspective the events of the month as a whole," which indicated that the BUF was "steadily gaining ground" in the East End; therefore, "the alleged Fascist defeat is in reality a fascist advance."<sup>15</sup>

However, liberal historians have not always paid much attention to the analyses and activities of liberal anti-fascists. The crucial reason for this lies in their differing estimations of inter-war Britain's vulnerability to fascism and the threat of the BUF. Communists and many on the broader Left between the wars believed that the economic and cultural systems of capitalist Britain made it ripe for communism. Thus, Alec Browne, writing in 1936, presented the British middle classes under "imperialist capitalism" as in a "dual and dubious position," and hence the "peculiar form of our nervousness"; while for Christopher Caudwell, fascism was the inevitable and universal result of bourgeois social relations transforming "all tender relations between men to relations to commodities": the absence of "rich emotional capabilities and social tenderness" under capitalism created "mad impossible loyalties to Hitlers and Aryan grandmothers."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *The Diary of Beatrice Webb, Volume IV, 1924-1943*, ed. by Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie (London, 1985), p. 334.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 110-11; John Stevenson and Chris Cook, *The Slump: Society and Politics during the Depression* (London, 1979), pp. 207-08.

<sup>16</sup> Alec Browne, *The Fate of the Middle Classes* (London, 1936), p. 177; Christopher Caudwell, "Love: A Study in Changing Values," in *Studies in A Dying Culture* (London, 1938), p. 156.



Present-day communists see the same danger in inter-war Britain. For Renton, the BUF even had "patronage from wide sections of the British establishment" and "The threat of fascism seemed very powerful, very real, and it would have been easy for anti-fascists to lose heart."<sup>17</sup>

Liberal historians, by contrast, are impressed by the solidity of inter-war Britain's political and social system, and the recovery of its economic system. As Carl Levy has written, "the hegemonic strength of the Conservative Party, the weakness of the extreme left, the lack of a socially unstable rural population, the lack of conflict between traditionalist Christianity and the secular state and the relatively democratic attitudes of employers left little political or social space for fascism to flourish."<sup>18</sup> Thurlow also commended the role of the National Government in passing the Public Order Act in December 1936, following Cable Street and the "Mile End Pogrom" a week later, even though political violence in Britain was "only a pale reflection of the conflict which led to the growth of fascism in Italy and Germany in the inter-war period"; and in outlawing the BUF in 1940, which he regards as demonstrating the healthy limits of tolerance of the British state.<sup>19</sup> Despite the Left's suspicion that the earlier Incitement to Disaffection Act of 1934 indicated that the National Government was adopting a fascist spirit, Gerald Anderson found that "all indications point to a genuine disdain within the Government of the BUF."<sup>20</sup>

Unless political and/or economic circumstances changed drastically, fascism had no prospect of success in Britain and conventional accounts typically explore the internal weaknesses of the BUF. Thus, the BUF's support at its peak, in the first six months of 1934, was about 50,000 and, in this first phase, the imminence of the collapse of the liberal capitalist system was central to Mosley's ideology. Martin Pugh is probably the liberal historian least dismissive of the challenge of the BUF between its formation in October 1932 and 1934, as unemployment continued to rise and fascism appealed to disillusioned grass-roots Conservatives and the young; and he also questions the received wisdom about the Olympia

<sup>17</sup>Renton, *This Rough Game*, p. 149; see also, Branson, "Myths from Right and Left."

<sup>18</sup>Carl Levy, "Fascism, National Socialism and Conservatives in Europe, 1914–1945: Issues for Comparativists," *Contemporary European History* 8 (1999), p. 116; John Stevenson, "Conservatism and the Failure of Fascism in Interwar Britain," in Martin Blinkhorn, ed., *Fascists and Conservatives: The Radical Right and the Establishment in Twentieth-Century Europe* (London, 1990), p. 264; Tom Jeffrey, "A Place in the Nation: The Lower Middle Class in England," in *Splintered Classes: Politics and the Lower Middle Classes in Interwar Europe*, ed. Rudy Koshar (New York, 1990), pp. 78, 81.

<sup>19</sup>Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, p.94; Richard Thurlow, "The Failure of British Fascism, 1932–40," in *The Failure of Political Extremism in Inter-war Britain*, ed. Andrew Thorpe (Exeter, 1989), pp. 68, 82–84.

<sup>20</sup>G. D. Anderson, *Fascists, Communists, and the National Government: Civil Liberties in Great Britain, 1931–1937* (Columbia, 1983), p. 6.



meeting; yet even he finally accepts that the modest economic recovery in 1934 put paid to the BUF's chances.<sup>21</sup> For most historians, fascist violence against opponents at Olympia on 7 June 1934 resulted in the loss of the support of the Rothermere press and a steep decline in membership to 5,000 by the end of the year.<sup>22</sup> Thereafter the BUF revived somewhat in working-class East London in 1936 and 1937 around anti-Semitic pronouncements and violence; and among the Home Counties middle classes by campaigning for peace with Germany in 1939; but these revivals were fleeting and it had no success in areas of high, long-term unemployment.<sup>23</sup> Liberal historians tend to accept Robert Skidelsky's judgement that by the mid-1930s British fascists and communists needed each other to magnify the significance of their respective parties.<sup>24</sup>

More broadly, liberal historians reject the view that "wide sections of the British establishment"—presumably comprising leading political, business, social, and cultural figures—supported fascism and/or the BUF; and believe that scholars who support such a view fail to make crucial distinctions between attitudes towards fascism within Britain, attitudes towards fascism within Italy and Germany, and attitudes towards international affairs, including appeasement and rearmament. It was possible, for example, not to want fascism in Britain while believing that it was entirely appropriate in the very different conditions of Italy and Germany, or accepting that nothing could or should be done about the nature of foreign regimes; or to be an anti-fascist appeaser, like many Conservatives, or anti-fascist opponents of rearmament, like many in the Labour Party. Philip Williamson's assessment of Stanley Baldwin is that his primary sense in 1934-35 was that "no one knows what the new Germany means - whether she means peace or war," and so it followed that the appropriate strategy was to prepare for all possibilities, while his "more basic aim—given the horrors

<sup>21</sup>Martin Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics, 1867-1939* (Oxford, 1982), p. 280; idem, "The British Union of Fascists and the Olympia Debate," *Historical Journal* 41 (1998): 529-42; idem, *State and Society: A Social and Political History of Britain, 1870-1997* (London, 1999), p. 218.

<sup>22</sup>Jon Lawrence, "Fascist Violence and the Politics of Public Order in Inter-war Britain: The Olympia Debate Revisited," *Historical Research* 76 (2003): 238 reasserts that, contrary to revisionist accounts, revulsion at fascist violence played an important part in the failure of Mosley and British fascism, with the Olympia meeting serving to alienate Conservative opinion.

<sup>23</sup>Robert Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (London, 1975), pp. 288-89; Stevenson and Cook, *The Slump*, pp. 199-217; Andrew Thorpe, *The Longman Companion to Britain in the Era of the Two World Wars, 1914-45* (Harlow, 1994), p. 29; Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp. 92-162; P. M. Coupland, "'Left-Wing Fascism' in Theory and Practice: The Case of the British Union of Fascists," *Twentieth Century British History* 13 (2002): 38-58. M. A. Spurr, "'Living the Blackshirt Life': Culture, Community and the British Union of Fascists, 1932-1940," *Contemporary European History* 12 (2003): 316, opens up new explanatory possibilities by suggesting that the "inwardness" of fascists groups may have stifled the revolutionary potential of the BUF, making the community an end in itself, and deflecting its efforts from the pursuit of political power.

<sup>24</sup>Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p. 359; Stevenson and Cook, *The Slump*, p. 206.

of modern warfare—was to keep Britain clear of any war that did not threaten its own strategic frontiers.”<sup>25</sup> Or, consider Hensley Henson, the Bishop of Durham: he had no special dislike of Mussolini before the summer of 1935, judging that while his methods were sometimes unfortunate, he did some good and prevented worse; whereas with Hitler he straightaway “knew what he thought but was not quick to speak.”<sup>26</sup> Noel Annan recalled that :

Fascism did not make much headway in Britain, certainly not among us. Very few of the appeasers actually liked the Nazis or wanted to imitate them. They could not believe that anyone could take such an ideology seriously. The Establishment belief that in high politics statesmen all talk the same language made the Conservative leaders insensitive to fascist ideology. They thought Hitler's ideas nasty but irrelevant.<sup>27</sup>

That there were some fascist sympathizers in the establishment is not in question; nor that after the war they, like many others, were obliged to re-invent their pre-war selves. What is in question is that these individuals had any significant power or influence. The seventh Marquess of Londonderry serves as a case in point. Harold Nicolson recorded in his diary that on V.E. Day:

I went on to a party at Chips Channon's....There in his room, copied from the Amalienburg, under the lights of many candles, were gathered the Nurembergers and the Munichois celebrating *our* victory over *their* friend Herr von Ribbentrop. I left early and in haste, leaving my coat behind me. A voice hailed me in Belgrave Square. It was Charles, seventh Marquess of Londonderry, Hitler's friend. As we walked towards his mansion in Park Lane, he explained to me how he had warned the Government about Hitler; how they would not listen to him; how, but for him, we should not have had the Spitfires....<sup>28</sup>

This was the man who, in October 1938, after the Munich conference, had still regarded Hitler as the “undisputed leader of a united people” who had “restored the sense of national pride and self-respect” of the Germans, and whose whole-hearted anti-bolshevism was “an attitude of mind which is not properly appreciated in this country.” In the same year, his wife's published memoir had regretted that, “The more positive “isms” are taboo, like Nazi-ism or Fascism, because they imply doing something.”<sup>29</sup> However, the critical point about Londonderry is that after his removal from the Air Ministry and replacement as Lord Privy Seal by Halifax in November 1935, he ceased to count politically.

<sup>25</sup>Philip Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 301–02.

<sup>26</sup>Owen Chadwick, *Hensley Henson: A Study in the Friction between Church and State* (Oxford, 1983), p. 241.

<sup>27</sup>Noel Annan, *Our Age: The Generation That Made Post-war Britain* (London, 1991), p. 274.

<sup>28</sup>Harold Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters, 1939–1945*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London, 1967), pp. 458–59.

<sup>29</sup>The Marquess of Londonderry, *Ourselves and Germany* (Harmondsworth, 1938), pp. 21–23, 25, 84–91; Susan Williams, *Ladies of Influence: Women of the Elite in Interwar Britain* (Harmondsworth, 2000), p. 14; C. L. Mowat, *Britain between the Wars, 1918–1940* (London, 1955), p. 592 on his “uncritical admiration of Nazi Germany.”

Most recently, the supposed links between members of the British royal family, notably Edward VIII, and the Nazi regime have been raised, if hardly proved.<sup>30</sup> Yet, even if one is skeptical of his official biographer's reflections that the ex-king's visit to Germany in October 1937 was "ill-timed and ill-advised, but it was not a crime," and that "A failure to take advice was indeed at the heart of the Duke's problems,"<sup>31</sup> the fundamental point is that the Court was not the center of executive decision-making.

In the post-war years, the critical requirement was not to demonstrate an implacable pre-war hostility to fascism: only those flagrantly guilty of high treason were dealt with.<sup>32</sup> Rather, as Williamson has demonstrated, the essential task was to re-fashion a political identity as a re-armer and anti-appeaser in order "to imply retrospective membership of what became a surprisingly large band of pre-war fellow-travelers with Churchill—the vital badge of respectability in post-war politics."<sup>33</sup>

## II

The writings and activities of Ernest Barker in the 1930s and 1940s give one indication of the vigor and scope of liberal anti-fascism in the political and social circles in which he moved. Born in rural, working-class, nonconformist Cheshire, he was a classical scholar at Balliol College, Oxford, then a fellow of St. John's and New College. Between 1920 and 1928 he was the principal of King's College, London, whereupon he became the first Professor of Political Science at Cambridge and fellow of Peterhouse. He was also a member of the consultative committee that produced *The Education of the Adolescent* in 1927. Barker was "a man of 'the establishment,'" fascinated by the society of noblemen and great figures and valuing "character." As a "late-Victorian liberal-conservative," he embodied many of the inter-war establishment's currents of thought,

<sup>30</sup>Kirsty McLeod, *Battle Royal* (London, 2000), pp. 244–51; Michael Allen, *Hidden Agenda: How the Duke of Windsor Betrayed the Allies* (New York, 2002); Theo Aronson, *Royal Subjects: A Biographer's Encounters* (London, 2000), pp. 22–23. A comprehensive, if uncritical, summary of the main charges is Lynn Picknett, Clive Prince, Stephen Prior and Robert Brydon, *War of the Windsors: A Century of Unconstitutional Monarchy* (Edinburgh, 2002).

<sup>31</sup>Philip Ziegler, *King Edward VIII: The Official Biography* (London, 1990), p. 386. Gerwin Strobl, *The Germanic Isle: Nazi Perceptions of Britain* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 108–10, suggests that there was no suggestion in German minds that the duke was a traitor, but that instead "there is something one comes across only very rarely in Nazi utterances: genuine respect; the respect felt for an equal," because of the Duke's modernity, vigour, determination, and his *Volksnahe*—"proximity to the people."

<sup>32</sup>Peter Martland, *Lord Haw Haw: The English Voice of Nazi Germany* (Kew, 2003), pp. 78–84; Adrian Weale, *Renegades: Hitler's Englishmen* (London, 2002), pp. 177–82. John Amery was executed on 19 December 1945, and William Joyce on 3 January 1946.

<sup>33</sup>Philip Williamson, "Baldwin's Reputation: Politics and History, 1937–1967," *Historical Journal* 47 (2004), p. 138. This, despite Churchill's own equivocations: R. A. C. Parker, *Churchill and Appeasement* (London, 2000), pp. ix–xi, 258–63.



though it was liberalism that represented "the unique and particular development of English political thought." Yet, he did not disown his background: he wrote in 1927 that there was "no bounden duty on any man to remain in his class. But there is a bounden duty on those who leave their class to retain a sympathy with it; [and] to seek to interpret its needs...."<sup>34</sup> He was not an anti-working class elitist.

Barker believed that the common civilization of Europe, in which Britain was inescapably involved,<sup>35</sup> was being destroyed "not with a simple conflict of ideologies but with a criss-cross of conflicts," notably the conflicts between fascism and communism and between the single-party, totalitarian states and the liberal-democratic ones. His even-handedness led him to recognize that totalitarianism "has a deep appeal to some of the finer instincts of men," such as the spirit of service and sacrifice; that there were elements of social fraternity in the German Labour Front; and that communism or fascism might contain an element of truth that would be worth considering.<sup>36</sup> However, Barker resolutely rejected all single-party, totalitarian states and many of his writings of the thirties are refutations of the ideas of their most acute apologist, Carl Schmitt. Moreover, he saw fascism as a serious challenge to British liberal democracy in the thirties, which the country and its politicians could not simply turn a blind eye to; he would have agreed with Orwell's comment after witnessing a BUF meeting in Wigan in 1936: "how easy it is to bamboozle an uneducated audience."<sup>37</sup> At the same time, the absence of any analysis of the BUF in his writings indicates that he did not believe the threat came from that specific quarter.

The threat was at once less rooted and more pervasive. For, while Barker saw that there were specific reasons why Germany and Italy had turned to fascism, he also believed that fascism was the product of general trends in all modern societies, trends that would not leave Britain untouched. Thus, Barker retained a broad confidence in the historic liberal democratic temper of the English, but it was neither limitless nor unconditional, and he saw that liberty was "not an

<sup>34</sup>G. E. G. Catlin, "Ernest Barker, 1874–1960," *Proceedings of the British Academy* (1960), p. 342; Julia Stapleton, *Englishness and the Study of Politics: The Social and Political Thought of Ernest Barker* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 198; Ernest Barker "Reasons for Being a Liberal," *The Liberal Magazine* 44 (1936): 95; Ernest Barker, *National Character and the Factors in Its Formation* (1927; reprint 1948), p. 114.

<sup>35</sup>This was not universally accepted, not even by the inter-war Pan-European Union, which, like Barker, rejected the idea of pure races in Europe: *The History of the Idea of Europe*, ed. by Kevin Wilson and Jan van der Dussen (London, 1995), pp. 97–99.

<sup>36</sup>Ernest Barker, *Reflections on Government* (Oxford, 1942), pp. 148, 270–71, 289–92, 384–90; Ernest Barker, "The Conflict of Ideologies," in *The Citizen's Choice* (Cambridge, 1937), pp. 13, 20; Stapleton, *Englishness and the Study of Politics*, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup>George Orwell, "The Road to Wigan Pier Diary," in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Vol. 1*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 231.



achievement, but a process...[with] no end and no final achievement, but a continuous life of effort and a continuous struggle of readjustment to the demands of time."<sup>38</sup> The upshot of his theory of fascism was that Britain would have to organize actively against fascism. His final assessment was probably similar to that of his fellow Cambridge Whig, G. M. Trevelyan, who wrote to his daughter in November 1935:

Yet as regards England I sometimes wonder if people are no more really spiritual minded and good than they ever were in spite of everything. It's quite impossible to tell. So though I have much fear, I have also gratitude and hope. If I lived in Germany or Italy I don't suppose I should have,—being what I am.<sup>39</sup>

Barker tended to recycle his writings and so *Reflections on Government*, his fullest exploration of fascism, published in 1942, developed lines of thought evident in his writings throughout the 1930s, especially in his collection of papers, *The Citizen's Choice*, in 1937. Barker valued freedom above all other values and he believed liberal democracy was its finest safeguard. He took issue with continental writers who argued that liberalism and democracy were "diametrical opposites" since the former was a negative doctrine that sought to abolish state interference while the latter, by accepting the right of the majority to impose its will, promoted it. For Barker, liberalism was:

a positive doctrine of the free man, freely holding his own position in the community, not in the teeth of the State, but by the aid and the guarantee of the State, which secures to him the rights - and not least the rights of free speech and free discussion - which are the conditions of his holding any position at all.

Democracy was not the worship of mass-decision but:

the worship of a quality—that quality of the thinking and discoursing mind which can dare to raise and to face conflicting views of the Good, and to seek by the way of discussion some agreed and accepted compromise whereby a true (because general) national will is attained, as it cannot otherwise be, and a national Good is secured which is really good because it is freely willed.

A system of government based on these twin pillars would permit "the development of personality and individuality in every self" and rest on the spiritual quality of the process of discussion.<sup>40</sup>

Barker did not consider that the vast populations of modern states made this process impossible, since discussion could proceed through parties, the electorate, Parliament and finally the Cabinet. He argued that the system required both material and "internal or mental" underpinnings. Materially, it needed some measure of national and social homogeneity. He stated that the ideal discussion was between equals and so "a community in which discussion moves easily

<sup>38</sup>Barker, *Reflections on Government*, p. 405.

<sup>39</sup>University of Newcastle, Mary Moorman Papers, MM1/4/23 G. M. Trevelyan to Mary Trevelyan, 13 November 1935.

<sup>40</sup>Barker, *Reflections on Government*, pp. 4, 36.

must also be a community animated by a spirit of social equality"; but how far equality should go could not command an agreed answer "in the present stage of our general social thought." Yet, he was certain that the Leninist theory of capitalistic democracy was wrong for "we must admit that the non-wealthy class is at least as well organized as the wealth-owning class: indeed, to all appearances, it is better organized; and "As we stand today, there is no war of classes." Mentally, the process of discussion needed acceptance of the three axioms of "Agreement to Differ," the "Majority Principle" and the "Principle of Compromise." The Majority Principle was not the same as a majority simply imposing its will since, through a process of discussion, members of the majority would widen their views and draw closer to the minority, ensuring the emergence of "a will which is tolerated by all and resented by none."<sup>41</sup>

In a liberal democracy, the desirable relationship between state and society was as follows:

Connected and interdependent, but also distinct, State and Society play different parts in a system of co-operation—the State being the sole vehicle of law and legal regulation, but Society (through its contained unions, societies, and associations) continuing to act for a variety of purposes by the side of the State, in connection with the State, and on a system of interdependence between the State and itself.<sup>42</sup>

Keeping the state in its place was a central tenet of Barker's liberalism. Julia Stapleton has suggested that Barker's boyhood and early nonconformity produced a lifelong reluctance to over-identify with the groups to which he belonged, and to rate the "duty of solitude" to oneself above the duty to family, neighbors, and the state.<sup>43</sup> Thus, in 1915, Barker termed the state the "community of communities"; and in 1935 he saw it as "really a mediator. Fundamentally, I do not so much owe obligation to it as I owe obligation through it."<sup>44</sup>

The nation was also only one of a number of groups to which the individual owed an obligation. Barker defined a nation as a community of persons whose unity was based on "the feeling of neighbourliness" and "the sense of a common participation in an inherited way of life," but whose members would normally be drawn from different races or stocks.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, during the First World

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., pp. 37–72, 108–13, 120.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. xv.

<sup>43</sup>Stapleton, *Englishness and the Study of Politics*, p. 24.

<sup>44</sup>Ernest Barker, *Political Thought in England, 1848 to 1914* (Oxford, 1915), p. 222; Barker, *The Citizen's Choice*, p. 147.

<sup>45</sup>Barker, *Reflections on Government*, p. xiv; Barker, *National Character*, pp. xvi, 2–3. Barker believed that, historically, the names Celts, Teutons, and Slavs were linguistic and cultural and did not signify "breed or blood"; Ernest Barker, "Review and Epilogue," in *The European Inheritance, Volume III*, ed. Ernest Barker, George Clark, and Paul Vaucher (Oxford, 1954), p. 311.

War Barker championed responsible multinational states grounded in "neighbourliness," notably the British Empire, over inward-looking nation-states based on "kinship," and even commended the internationalism of pre-nationalist medieval Christendom.<sup>46</sup> Barker also praised the British state which managed to be at once "multinational and a single nation" and so produced an undemonstrative "English" nationalism that complemented the English distrust of "sounding words and abstract propositions."<sup>47</sup>

Barker believed that modern history was inaugurated after 1500 by the new principle of nationality, which was "Protean in its forms." In the nineteenth century it had fostered liberal democracy; but in the twentieth totalitarianism.<sup>48</sup> Fascism was a "new nationalism"<sup>49</sup> in which:

the freedom of the national State is the supreme freedom, which absorbs and engulfs—or, as the Nationalist himself prefers to say, includes and realizes—the freedom of the individual. Whether the Nation be conceived, as it is in the new philosophy of modern Germany, as a racial unit resting upon a physical basis, or whether it be regarded, as it is in the philosophy developed by Italian Fascism, as a transcendental metaphysical organism, with a higher existence and with higher ends and means of action, the national State must above all be free—free within, from the conflict of sectional parties and the collision of local or provincial interests; free without, from the presence of any "foreign" constraint or would-be international limit which impedes the flow of national political control over the whole of the area assumed to belong to the national stock and the national interest.<sup>50</sup>

Barker could never see the nation either as a racial group or an organism. Commenting on the Italian Charter of Labour of 1927, he wrote that "The group at its highest, when it almost seems to merge plurality into unity, is still to me so many individual human beings" and that what mattered was the common purpose that individuals agreed.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, he noted that far from fascist corporativism being "a philosophy of group-liberty," it was a system that disadvantaged working-class groups in relation to other groups.<sup>52</sup>

Barker habitually understood the spread of modern Fascism in a number of different contexts: firstly, that of the specific national histories, both ancient and

<sup>46</sup>Stapleton, *Englishness and the Study of Politics*, pp. 98–99, 102.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 124; Julia Stapleton, "Political Thought and National Identity in Britain, 1850–1950," in *History, Religion, and Culture: British Intellectual History, 1750–1950*, ed. Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 257, 266.

<sup>48</sup>Barker, "Review and Epilogue," p. 328.

<sup>49</sup>Barker, "Review and Epilogue," p. 342.

<sup>50</sup>Barker, *Reflections on Government*, pp. 2–3.

<sup>51</sup>Ernest Barker, "Maitland as a Sociologist," *Sociological Review* 29 (1937): 129; Barker, *National Character*, p. 257.

<sup>52</sup>Barker, "Maitland as a Sociologist," p. 129; Barker, *National Character*, p. 257; Barker, "The Corporative State," in *The Citizen's Choice*, p. 98.



recent, of Germany and Italy; secondly, that of a return to more primitive common forms; and thirdly, that of common European patterns of modern technological developments, evident before the first world war, but much exacerbated by the war and its aftermath, especially in Germany and Italy. Thus, Barker wrote that Fascism, whether it took the Wagnerian or new Augustan form, drew upon the particular national traditions of romanticism, which, in the case of Germany, quoting Troeltsch, "placed leadership in the hands of great men, from whom the spirit of the whole essentially radiated and by whom it was organised." The *Fuhrer-prinzip*, therefore, was "not a new and sudden eruption." Likewise, Italian history had always shown "a more personal character," since personal figures became "the necessary symbols of national unity" and readily appealed to the uneducated agricultural laborers who formed the majority of the country.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, there was a sense in which Italian and German Fascism were "simply new phases of the still incomplete and still continuing process of Italian and German unification," with the Nazi racial philosophy of "Folk into Race" the response to the practical need for nationalists to determine what gave Germans unity following the disunity of the Weimar system. Yet, Barker also wrote that National Socialism was "fundamentally unique. It is devoted to the ideal of a "closed" society, which is based on a peculiar and individual genius of soil and stock," which was not true of either Italy or the Soviet Union.<sup>54</sup> Secondly, he saw all single-party states returning to "an earlier age of undifferentiated homogeneity, prior to the present stage of political evolution...a return to the old Greek city-State, in which State and community were still one and undivided."<sup>55</sup>

Understood in these contexts, a successful Fascism was not possible in Britain. But understood thirdly, as the product of modernity, it was. For Barker identified five inter-related trends as common features of the age since the First World War. The first was a trend of anti-intellectualism, which looked to "the cult of instinct, or, at the best, of sub-conscious thought" and expected that "non-intellectual forces will suffice to achieve the State as it should be." The second was "a new eruption of the personal," shaped by the ideas of Nietzsche, Bergson, Sorel, and Pareto. The third was "the eruption of the group and of the worship of the group," whether it was a race, a nation or a class, whereby the group determines the existence of individuals and one form of the group - the state - is "made to absorb and abolish the rest," so that a totalitarian state has a "com-

<sup>53</sup>Barker, "Review and Epilogue," pp. 342-43; Barker, *Reflections on Government*, pp. 129-30, 133-34, 136.

<sup>54</sup>Barker, *Reflections on Government*, pp. 144, 157, 391.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 293. Rebecca West dismissed Italian fascism as "this inferior modern copy" of the reforms of Diocletian (*Selected Letters of Rebecca West*, ed. Kime Scott [New Haven, 2000], p. 164).



plete and solitary control of human life and activity."<sup>56</sup> The fourth trend was the fact that "Life in a great modern city is a great artifice" and "each street is a cage." Such an environment engendered:

a nervousness which one may almost call by the name of feverishness. When men live in overcrowded houses, without sufficient air, and when their food is largely mechanical preparations, it is difficult for their bodies to acquire the firm tone which will foster a quiet temper....When the physical conditions of life are of this nature, we may expect to find them accompanied by their mental and moral corollaries—a lively and impressionable receptivity, which readily sheds what it has quickly imbibed; an instantaneous zest for some new purpose or mode of life, coupled with a rapid cooling and evaporation of the interest and the energy necessary for its permanent maintenance.

The final trend was the fact that the First World War had "increased the mechanization of life, and caused a new massing of men in still greater aggregations." Barker thought that "the convulsion of the War" had been greatest in Germany and Italy, undermining irreparably the position of the governing elements in both and causing the lower strata of the middle classes to be "displaced and almost submerged" in the defeated country. As a result, fascists and Nazis had been able to appeal to "the middle interests of society."<sup>57</sup>

The impact of modern development complemented national peculiarities and ensured that the danger was greatest in Germany and Italy. However, other countries, including Britain, were now also seen as vulnerable and Barker recognized as urgently as any communist, and more consistently, that action had to be taken. He did not believe that a revival of the countryside was imperative, since it was, in H. V. Morton's phrase, "guarding the traditions of the race"; or of the democratic potential of the Edwardian industrial city.<sup>58</sup> Instead, he argued that democracy could be safeguarded in Britain by improving the power of discussion through broadening civic intelligence and knowledge by promoting education for citizenship; and by establishing a "general and national system of adult education." This, in turn, required "the steady reduction of the existing inequalities of education and 'means,'" though this would not be an easy policy to pursue, and finally a striving for fraternity "to provide a common stock and equal facilities for a common and equal enjoyment." It also required the estab-

<sup>56</sup>Barker, *Political Thought in England from Herbert Spencer to the Present Day* (London, 1915), pp. 248, 155; Peter Lassman, "English pluralism," in *British Politics and the Spirit of the Age: Political Concepts in Action*, ed. Cornelia Navari (Keele, 1996), p. 71; Barker, *Reflections on Government*, pp. 123–29, 142–43, 151–53.

<sup>57</sup>Barker, "Review and Epilogue," p. 342; Barker, "The Social Background of Recent Political Changes," in *The Citizen's Choice*, pp. 71–72.

<sup>58</sup>H. V. Morton, *In Search of England* (London, 1927), p. x; John Baxendale, "'I Had Seen a Lot of Englands': J. B. Priestley, Englishness and the People," *History Workshop Journal* 51 (2001): 89, 93, 107.

lishment of local forums in which discussion could take place and that could recreate the fractured sense of urban community. Barker was careful to acknowledge that the very notion of education for citizenship involved a dilemma. The prospect of national governments having a role in teaching citizenship, on the grounds that to educate for citizenship was to educate for the state was "a terrifying idea," while the alternative of not educating for the state invited trouble in a democratic state, which demanded "thought and intelligence from its members." Barker saw the solution of this dilemma in recognizing that in the democratic state, any education of the citizen was not an education to suit the government but "an education of him to be the government"; that education was not confined to schools, but occurred through "membership of voluntary bodies," including clubs, trade unions, churches and chapels, and community associations; and that education in civics was only a part of education in schools.<sup>59</sup>

Barker's purpose of protecting the conditions of liberty through education for citizenship and community renewal was shared by a wide spectrum of establishment opinion in the 1930s and 1940s. Stanley Baldwin's anti-totalitarianism "went deeper than ordinary party and government concerns"; so that in the late 1930s he was seeking finance for a large program of political education.<sup>60</sup> The Conservative MP and parliamentary secretary to the Board of Education, Herwald Ramsbotham, wrote that continental movements relied on "spectacular incentives to emotion" and that education developed the critical powers to resist anybody who gains power in this way.<sup>61</sup> For the Fabian Cyril Joad in 1938, "Over most of the civilized world today liberty of thought does not exist," undermined by "omnipotent and strictly irresponsible" government and the generation of the mass-mind in education, employment, and leisure. Since education under Fascism was "not education in the school alone, but in every milieu (path) of society," the remedy to enable democracy to survive was education in citizenship:

The essence of the demand is that young people should possess some knowledge of the world in which they live, of its problems, of their origin, and of its recent history...[and] men's minds should be instructed in the arts by which sinister influences can be resisted.

<sup>59</sup>Barker, *Reflections on Government*, pp. 412–20; Barker, "The Teaching of Politics," in *The Citizen's Choice*, pp. 154–61.

<sup>60</sup>Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin*, pp. 316–17, 319–26; see also, Philip Williamson, "Christian Conservatives and the Totalitarian Challenge, 1933–40," *English Historical Review* (June 2000): 615–19. For Baldwin, however, fascism and Nazism were "marginally less horrible than communism," since fascism was bred by communism and communism was "the most corrosive of civilised values."

<sup>61</sup>*Public Opinion*, 1 June 1934, p. 510; see also, Lord Eustace Percy [former Minister for Education], "Does Popular Education Breed Dictatorship," *Public Opinion*, 22 February 1935, p. 178 and "The Archbishop [of York] and the Avoidance of Mob Rule," *Public Opinion*, 21 December 1934, p. 618.

This represents a change of emphasis from the "paradox of want in the midst of plenty" that had marked Joad's contribution as editor to the *Manifesto of the Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals* in 1934.<sup>62</sup> Sir Norman Angell argued in 1940 that masses of men had "no sense of why it [democracy] had such supreme value; why it was worth dying for."<sup>63</sup>

More broadly, the distinction between "totalitarian dictatorships" and liberal democracies was accepted by both the Labour Party and the Church of England.<sup>64</sup> Other prominent figures shared Barker's purpose but had different or confused ideas about achieving it. For Laski, "the condition of liberty has visibly deteriorated over most of the civilised world" between 1930 and 1937 but its revival required "the imagination to perceive that the inevitable accompaniment of political democracy would be the demand for social equality."<sup>65</sup> Philip Gibbs wrote in 1933:

Those two systems—Fascism and Communism—stand as extreme examples of state worship and the law of the hive; but other nations deceive themselves if they imagine that they are not being penetrated by the same philosophy and method of life. Every tendency in the modern world is hostile to individualism and favorable to standardization of types and social discipline for communal purposes.

However, he wavered between "[defending] the individual mind by handicrafts and hobbies, by secret hiding-places, by developing differences" or looking to a "new aristocracy of intelligence" or relying on "the kindliness, the humour and the shrewdness of the ordinary folk."<sup>66</sup> Even British communists too emphasized liberty in the late 1930s, producing *A Handbook of Freedom*, an anthology of "the best in past democratic traditions," in 1939. Nevertheless, liberty remained a sectarian value for communists. For Christopher Caudwell it was a "bourgeois illusion" and for Ivor Montagu the working class alone had a "vested interest in liberty that is not capable of being bartered."<sup>67</sup>

<sup>62</sup>C. E. M. Joad, *Liberty Today* (London, 1938), pp. 4, 8n., 36, 46–52, 211–12; *Manifesto: Being the Book of the Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals*, ed. C. E. M. Joad (London, 1934), pp. 7–9, 22–61.

<sup>63</sup>Norman Angell, *Why Freedom Matters* (Harmondsworth, 1940), pp. 32–33.

<sup>64</sup>Tom Lawson, "The Anglican Understanding of Nazism, 1933–1945: Placing the Church of England's Response to the Holocaust in Context," *Twentieth Century British History* 14 (2003): 112–28; Newman, "Democracy versus Dictatorship," p. 68.

<sup>65</sup>H. J. Laski, *Liberty in the Modern State* (Harmondsworth, 1937), p. 11; H. J. Laski, *The Danger of Being A Gentleman and Other Essays* (London, 1939), p. 25.

<sup>66</sup>Philip Gibbs, *Ways of Escape* (London, 1933), pp. 280–307; idem, *European Journey* (London, 1934), p. 439.

<sup>67</sup>Margot Heinemann, "The People's Front and the Intellectuals," in *Britain, Fascism and The Popular Front*, pp. 177–79; Caudwell, "Liberty: A Study in Bourgeois Illusion," in *Studies in A Dying Culture*, pp. 193–228; Ivor Montagu, *The Traitor Class* (London, 1940), p. 136.



## III

Barker not only advocated organized action, he took it, principally through his commitment to the New Estates Community Committee and the Association for Education in Citizenship. The anti-Fascism of these organizations was at once more ambitious and less immediate than communist demonstrations. Their aim was to remove, over a long period of time, the social and educational conditions that made any democracy vulnerable to fascist ideas. No great claim can be made for their effectiveness: the numbers attracted, the facilities offered, the occasional divisions all point to a very limited impact. Fascism made no headway in Britain for other reasons; but they were liberal anti-Fascism in action; and provide evidence of democratic vitality in Britain in the 1930s in community associations at the local, neighborhood level and among the political elite across parties.

The New Estates Community Committee (NECC) was formed in 1928 under the chairmanship of Barker and brought together the National Council of Social Service, the Educational Settlements Association, and the British Association of Residential Settlements. After 1935, when it was officially renamed the Community Centres and Associations Committee, it also included the Workers' Educational Association, with which Barker had a lifelong involvement,<sup>68</sup> the Association of Directors and Secretaries for Education, the Association of Education Committees, and the Board of Education. Barker saw the post-war housing estate, whether municipal or private, as a "new unit of social life," which had three novel features: it was the result of "an act of immediate total creation"; its members all belonged to one social class, which also meant it had "no obvious initial leaders"; and it was not a unit of local government.<sup>69</sup> Raymond Unwin warned the 1935 NECC conference that the vast aggregations of people of one grade in suburbs and housing estates had become "little more than disorganised crowds."<sup>70</sup> Barker supported the need to encourage social mixing on new estates; but by the later 1930s he was pre-occupied by "the right use of leisure time":

A society which guarantees leisure is guaranteeing something which may be useless, and even dangerous, unless it adds, or at any rate encourages its members to add, the one thing which will enable the gift to be used - a continuous process of education.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup>Ernest Barker, "For Adults: The Idea of People's Colleges," in *Education in Britain: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, ed. R. A. Scott-James (London, 1944), pp. 68-74.

<sup>69</sup>Ernest Barker, "Preface," in NCSS, *New Housing Estates and Their Social Problems* (1938), pp. 3-4.

<sup>70</sup>Ministry of Health, *Departmental Committee on Garden Cities and Satellite Towns* (London, 1935), p. 9.

<sup>71</sup>National Council of Voluntary Organizations Archive (NCVO), New Estates Conference, 1937, p. A1; Ernest Barker, "New Housing Estates—The Problem," *Social Service Review* 12 (1931): 47; Ernest Barker, *The Uses of Leisure* (London, 1936), p. 8. Henry Durant documented this "new world of leisure," which was "a problem, one almost said a danger" (Henry Durant, *The Problem of Leisure* [London, 1938], pp. 3-7, 17).



The community association could provide this "continuous process of education." Barker told the 1937 NECC conference that the community association was "developing a new method of democracy, and writing a new chapter in the history of English self-government," and he assured the 1938 conference that "the democratic quality of a Community Association and a Community Center has been what has drawn me to be interested in it and what has sustained my interest in it." He reflected that:

It has been my lot more than once lately to visit Germany. I cannot but admire and fear a country organized from one center to such a pitch of physical and mental efficiency as Germany is organized today. I cannot but love and love strongly a country, such as my own, which has many centers which rest on the voluntary member, the voluntary group life which has been so deep in our English history and which I pray may continue to survive.<sup>72</sup>

Barker hoped that community associations could "help to make our cities something like Athens in its great days—the homes of men who are working together to govern themselves, but also find time to cultivate together the fruits of beauty and knowledge," while recognizing that there was a "danger of being doctrinaire; of thinking, as Plato would have thought, that there is an idea of a Community Center laid up in the heaven of our mind, which must be universally copied."<sup>73</sup> Even so, Barker's view that every citizen had "some measure of duty" to study the texts in Oakeshott's reader, *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe*,<sup>74</sup> suggests high expectations of his fellow citizens.

On the ground, the democratic potential of community associations was hampered by uncertainty about the degree of leadership that should be exercised within and over associations. For many in the social service movement, and beyond it, what was unspoken here was a belief that the working class, whether in new one-class areas or in older neighborhoods, were not capable of sustaining democracy. Barker did not share this prejudice. It was not a social class but technological and physical change that promoted the cult of the leader and the worship of the group.

Ideally, community associations should be started and controlled by local people. Barker told the 1937 NECC conference that:

this country did not know the doctrine of leadership....[The British people] acted not on the principle of individual leadership, or the initiative of the one, but on the principle of fairly putting their heads together and each putting something into

<sup>72</sup>NCVO Archive, New Estates Conference, 1937, p. A2; NCVO Archive, New Estates Conference, 1938, p. 11.

<sup>73</sup>Barker, "Preface," p. 6; NCVO Archive, New Estates Conference, 1938, pp. 10–11.

<sup>74</sup>Ernest Barker, "Foreword," in *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (Cambridge, 1939), p. vi.

the melting pot....No one man could guide any institution. Those who belonged to it, if they put their minds together, could.<sup>75</sup>

Some delegates thought that "group-organization" was "innate in the people, as was proved by the springing up of 'street-committees' in connection with the Coronation celebrations."<sup>76</sup> Sir Wyndham Deedes of the NCSS, on the other hand, felt that the initiative too often came from outside the estate and that "Our difficulty today lies to a great extent in the fact that we are creating Community centers artificially." Yet there seemed no alternative, since there was no large-scale spontaneous movement from below. Moreover, Deedes also believed experience proved that "if the affairs of the community are to be managed efficiently, a full-time officer is essential," aided if need be, some in the NECC proposed, by residents of neighboring middle-class districts.<sup>77</sup> This led to criticism that "there was not a lack of leaders in a Center, only a certain danger in expecting there ever to be only one leader. The Secretary must correspond to a Civil Servant, and must not become a Fuhrer."<sup>78</sup>

A similar dilemma arose over a proposal to form a "democratically elected national committee representative of the associations and federations" to present the needs of new estates to ministers and voluntary bodies. The proposers felt that the members of the NECC were "not representative enough of the movement." Barker's response demonstrated his usual combination of commitment and caution, but also an awareness of the limitations of the NECC's work:

I hope you will believe that I believe, with all my heart, in the practice of democratic self-government in the area of the State. I hope you will also believe that I don't believe in philanthropical patronising charity. But there is one thing about which I have begun to think - how far can you introduce political democracy into the area of social work and social activity. I think one has to act according to the quality of the material and the nature of the work. In politics you must have democracy because (a) the voter is a tax-payer, and he ought to have a say about the taking of his money, and (b) the voter is going to be constrained by laws, and he ought to have a say about the constraint he is going to come under. These conditions are not present in our work....

<sup>75</sup>NCVO Archive, New Estates Conference, 1937, p. G2. Yet, at the same time, as the German Anglophile Paul Cohen-Portheim wrote in 1932, "there is in the English character a strong dose of independence, resenting absorption in the mass" (Paul Cohen-Portheim, *The Discovery of Europe* [London, 1932], p. 19).

<sup>76</sup>NCVO Archive, New Estates Conference, 1937, p. F2.

<sup>77</sup>Wyndham Deedes, "Community Centres and Their Future," *The Spectator*, 19 March 1937, p. 511; *New Housing Estates and Their Social Problems*, p. 19.

<sup>78</sup>NCVO Archive, Report of the Conference of Community Associations and Similar Organizations of Residents in Greater London, 24 September 1938, p. 3 Jenkins's charge of a fetishistic managerialism is a gross misrepresentation for the inter-war period: John Jenkins, "The Organization Man: George Haynes at the National Council of Social Service," in *Consensus or Coercion?: The State, the People and Social Cohesion in Post-war Britain*, ed. Lawrence Black (Cheltenham, 2001), p. 166.

All the same, I should like to see it democratically run if I saw how that could be done. I don't. Could we get the funds from trusts if we were elected persons, built up from below? Could we offer advice and help if we weren't somehow so constituted that we were certain to be persons competent to offer advice and help? These are the questions that assail me. I think the great thing to which we should stick is the application of the principle of democracy in the management of the local Community Center and in the life of each local Community Association. Granted that great root, I am content to have a central body which does its job well....

I want to move more and more to "social democracy"...but I can't jump the whole way at once.<sup>79</sup>

As chairman of the NECC, Barker visited community centers on new estates in London, Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Sheffield, and Edinburgh.<sup>80</sup> It must have been painfully evident how much remained to be done if community associations were to play any significant role in deepening the democratic process of discussion. In October 1936, the NECC produced a summary of its dealings with 148 municipal and nine private estates in the major cities. Thirty had a community center, of which three were on private estates, and twenty had plans for one. By May 1937, there were thirty-seven community centers; but twenty-one were wooden huts or other temporary buildings, eleven small permanent buildings, three bigger but still inadequate permanent buildings and only two "reasonably adequate centers." The local authorities were beginning to show some interest, providing eighteen of these centers. However, none of these centers were in the last two categories. At this time, there were 550 new municipal estates housing 2,386,000 tenants. In 1939, there were ninety-two centers and eighty-two were planned. One estimate suggests that less than two per cent of inter-war tenants on large municipal estates had a community center.<sup>81</sup> Most new estate dwellers seemed to prefer home-based leisure activities such as gardening and many regarded community centers as run by self-appointed cliques.<sup>82</sup>

Barker was also a member of the Council of the Association for Education in Citizenship (AEC), which was founded in 1935 "to answer the challenge of dictatorship" by advancing "training in the moral qualities necessary for the citizens of a democracy."<sup>83</sup> Its founder and chairman, the former Liberal MP

<sup>79</sup>NCVO Archive, C63/12/1 Memorandum on National Organization of Community Associations [March 1936], pp. 1-2; The National Federation of Community Associations, 7 September 1937; Ernest Barker to E. Sewell Harris, 22 September 1937.

<sup>80</sup>Barker, "Preface," p. 5.

<sup>81</sup>NCVO Archive, C63/6 New Estates Community Committee. Lists Showing New Estates in Certain Cities, October 1936, p. 8; Community Centres. 1937 and 1942; L. E. White, *Community or Chaos* (London, 1950), pp. 10, 15.

<sup>82</sup>Andrzej Olechnowicz, *Working-Class Housing in England between the Wars: The Becontree Estate* (Oxford, 1997), ch. 6.

<sup>83</sup>*The Times*, 27 January 1939; Association for Education in Citizenship, *Education for Citizenship in Secondary Schools* (Oxford, 1936), Object; see also, "Education and Citizenship Supplement," *The New Statesman and Nation*, 14 July 1934.



and organizer of the Liberal Summer School in the 1920s,<sup>84</sup> as well as the initiator of the Wythenshawe municipal estate outside Manchester, Sir Ernest Simon, defined an "authoritarian state" as one in which "the government dreads opposition and free thought and suppresses it by violence," quoting the Nazis as saying, "We think with our blood." By contrast, the citizen of a democracy had to "respect the individualities of others and therefore be tolerant of opinions in conflict with his own; he must prefer methods of discussion and persuasion to methods of force."<sup>85</sup> Simon believed that the great majority of British people rejected fascist ideals, but he was alarmed that in Britain "we seem to have lost the art of government and leadership," and that, as elsewhere, British democracy was becoming the "cult of incompetence."<sup>86</sup> What was required was an extension and deepening of education to include citizenship.

Education for citizenship could be promoted through subjects such as history, geography, economics, politics, English, classics, modern languages, mathematics, science, and art, with care taken to eliminate the bias and dogma of teachers; but it also required direct training by developing clear and accurate thinking, which entailed the discipline of logic, the avoidance of prejudice and the awareness of suggestibility and dishonest tricks of argument, such as "advertisement appeal" in newspapers.<sup>87</sup> Books such as J. W. Marriott's *Arguments and Discussions*, published in 1937, a companion to his *Exercises in Thinking and Expressing*, gave hints to young people on how to debate topics such as "Ought We to Blame the Machines?," "Creating Work for All," "The Social Classes," "The Making of Laws," "Concerning Democracy," "Are We really Free?," "Where Is Utopia?" and "Discipline and Freedom."<sup>88</sup> The AEC operated through personal contacts, the newspapers, publications and conferences. In February 1939, the Association organized a "Youth Conference on Democracy, Today and Tomorrow," which attracted twenty organizations, including youth movements, schools, universities, and junior branches of political parties.<sup>89</sup>

Barker was more contented with the quality of British government than Simon; but the AEC campaigned for practical action on one of Barker's chief concerns.

<sup>84</sup>Michael Freeden, *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought, 1914-1939* (Oxford, 1984), ch. 4.

<sup>85</sup>E. D. Simon, "The Aims of Education for Citizenship," in *Education for Citizenship in Secondary Schools*, pp. 3-4, 7.

<sup>86</sup>E. D. Simon, "The Aims of Education for Citizenship," p. 4; idem, *The Smaller Democracies* (London, 1939), p. 12.

<sup>87</sup>*Education for Citizenship in Secondary Schools*, chs.2-16, pp. 249-53; Peter Gordon and Dennis Lawton, *Curriculum Change in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London, 1978), p. 117.

<sup>88</sup>J. W. Marriott, *Arguments and Discussions* (London, 1937), pp. 5-8.

<sup>89</sup>*The Times*, 4 February 1939.

Moreover, its non-partisan approach suited Barker's temperament. Its president was Sir Henry Hadow, the vice-presidents H. A. L. Fisher, the Earl of Lytton, Gilbert Murray and Lord Passfield, the honorary secretary Eva Hubback and the members of the Council also included prominent establishment figures of many shades of opinion from Beatrice Webb, G. D. H. Cole, and Sir Norman Angell to Arthur Bryant and Alderton Pink. In 1937, Simon successfully canvassed for Baldwin to succeed Hadow as president.<sup>90</sup>

It is even more difficult to estimate the influence of the AEC than the NECC. Not all Council members approached the work of the AEC in a high-minded way. Bryant wrote to a fellow Conservative in 1937:

My own name has been on the Council, as that of a solitary Tory among a host of Left Wing publicists, for the last three years. But in point of practice most of the left Wing publicists take no active part in the affairs of the Council....[M]y more recent activities in connection with it [are] due to a fear that the Council might be used as a means of turning "compulsory teaching in citizenship" in secondary schools into the same kind of medium for instilling Left Wing political and economic opinions as the state aided adult education movement has so largely become.<sup>91</sup>

Barker, too, as we have seen, recognized dangers surrounding education for citizenship, but these were not as crudely partisan as Bryant's concerns. Such tensions no doubt made it difficult to advance an agreed program of any great substance. Even so, Oliver Stanley, the president of the Board of Education, endorsed the AEC in 1936 by writing a foreword to its *Education for Citizenship in Secondary Schools*, in which he identified three main standpoints: "vocational education," "education for leisure," and "education for citizenship."<sup>92</sup> The Report of the Consultative Committee on Secondary Education in 1939 also endorsed education for citizenship, though by reaffirming the official emphasis on indirect training.<sup>93</sup> However, there is no evidence for these endorsements making any difference to the culture of schools.<sup>94</sup>

#### IV

This article set out to challenge a definition of anti-Fascism that appears to rule out all but Communist resistance to the BUF, and ignored the thought and activities of liberal figures like Ernest Barker, who did not believe that the BUF

<sup>90</sup>Bryant Papers, C/41, John Davidson to Arthur Bryant, 5 October 1937.

<sup>91</sup>Bryant Papers, E/1, Arthur Bryant to Keith Feiling, 9 June 1937; see also, C/6, Arthur Bryant to G. Fry, 19 January 1937.

<sup>92</sup>Oliver Stanley, "Foreword," in *Education for Citizenship in Secondary Schools*, p. v.

<sup>93</sup>Rodney Barker, *Education and Politics, 1900-1951* (Oxford, 1972), p. 140; Gordon and Lawton, *Curriculum Change*, p. 117.

<sup>94</sup>Gordon and Lawton, *Curriculum Change*, pp. 117-18.

posed any serious threat but were alarmed by the potential attractiveness of fascist ideas under certain conditions in any industrialized country. This is unacceptable, because it claims too much credit for a Communist Party that was not consistently anti-fascist and underestimates the consistency and coherence of liberal views of Fascism as a form of nationalist totalitarianism and the resolve of liberals to organize to take action to renew democracy. To the charge that the difference was that the Communists really acted while the liberals merely talked, it is worth recalling the words of the principal of Ruskin College, writing in praise of democratic leadership, that "Among the supporters of action"—whether Communist or Fascist—I have not indeed observed any the less disposition to idle and even recriminatory talk."<sup>95</sup> Ultimately, the NECC and AEC altered very little on the ground on new housing estates or in schools, though they did serve to highlight the dangers to democracy and to reinforce a form of "middle opinion" that was broader, more significant, and differently constituted than that identified by Arthur Marwick forty years ago.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup>A. Barratt Brown, "Epilogue: Democratic Leadership," in *Great Democrats*, ed. A. Barratt Brown (London, 1934), p. 694.

<sup>96</sup>Arthur Marwick, "Middle Opinion in the Thirties: Planning, Progress and Political 'Agreement,'" *English Historical Review* 79 (1964): 285, 287–88, 293–96.